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Liberals Discuss Electoral Overhaul

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

WASHINGTON, Jan. 20 — On the campaign trail last year, Al Gore liked to lament the injustices of the world by quoting a character from the 1991 movie "Grand Canyon." The character was played by Danny Glover and the line was this: "It's not supposed to be this way."

Mr. Glover, a liberal activist, is now using this line to lament the outcome of the presidential election.

"We have to talk about the work that needs to be done," Mr. Glover said in an interview here Friday at a meeting of liberals about overhauling the election process. "I came because I want to hear how people are going to organize" to change the system, he said. He referred to the Supreme Court decision that led to George W. Bush's becoming president as "the big lie" and added, "It's not supposed to be this way."

In the shadow of this weekend's inaugural celebrations, a nascent movement began taking shape to seek ways to translate disgust with the election into easier access to voting and more precise methods of counting ballots.

While many of the 200 people meeting here called Mr. Bush an illegitimate president, this was not a weepy session for Gore apologists or even mainstream Democrats. Hardly anyone mentioned Mr. Gore, except to say he had not been a good candidate; quite a few said, without apparent remorse, that they had supported Ralph Nader, the third-party candidate who arguably cost Mr. Gore the election. Others were bent on forming a new third party.

But they were united in believing that the nation's electoral system is deeply flawed, especially since it does not crown as the winner the person who wins the popular vote. They see the 2000 presidential election as providing a once-in-a-generation impetus to rally people to change the system.

"It's rare that a new issue comes forward and catalyzes people," said John Cavanagh, director of the Institute for Policy Studies, one of the groups that sponsored Friday's daylong talkathon on Capitol Hill. Others included the Nation Institute and the Center for Voting and Democracy.

"It's the issue that will bring together the black caucus and liberals, whites, Democrats and Hispanics in a longstanding reform effort," Mr. Cavanagh said.

Through the Internet, a coalition called the Pro-Democracy Campaign has already drawn up a 10-point "Voters' Bill of Rights." Now in its fourth draft, it calls for:

- ¶ Abolishing the Electoral College.

- ¶ Allowing voter registration up to and on Election Day.

- ¶ So-called instant runoff voting, which would allow voters to rank their choice of candidates in order of preference. If no candidate received more than 50 percent of the vote, the votes of those who had not picked one of the top two contenders would be automatically recast for their second or third choice.

- ¶ Proportional representation. This would eliminate the winner-take-all awarding of representatives and electoral votes.

- ¶ Overhaul of the campaign finance system.

- ¶ Extension of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which is to expire in 2007, and strengthening of the Justice Department's voting rights enforcement division.

¶Restoration of voting rights for ex-felons who have served their time.

¶Easier access to ballots and debates by minority-party candidates.

¶Independent election administrators.

¶Statehood for the District of Columbia.

There was much disagreement even among the liberals here as to the merit of these items, with especially deep divisions over the value of instant runoff voting and proportional representation. Not everyone agreed that all these ideas should be lumped together, because some, like statehood for the District of Columbia, have never appealed to Republicans and are likely only to alienate them further.

That of course is the main problem with such sweeping election changes. Republicans fear that such change will only increase Democratic voting and do not support it, having so far backed only a modest proposal in Congress co-sponsored by Senator Mitch McConnell, Republican of Kentucky, and Senator Robert G. Torricelli, Democrat of New Jersey. That bill would create an election commission to study local voting procedures and approve grants to the states of less than \$100 million to modernize voting equipment.

Innocuous as this might sound, it was viewed skeptically by some here. Todd Cox, a lawyer with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which recently filed a class-action suit against Florida election officials on behalf of black voters, warned that Republican attempts to "fix" voting problems could only exacerbate discriminatory practices.

"We need to figure out a way to get electoral reform without jeopardizing what protections we already have," he said. "In this political environment, I think it might be dangerous to do that; it might be dangerous to have a discussion in Congress or in this city about the efficacy of the Voting Rights Act."

But there was not much in this gathering to warm the hearts of Republicans. Featured were some of the most liberal members of Congress, including Democratic Representatives Dennis J. Kucinich of Ohio and Cynthia A. McKinney of Georgia and Bernard Sanders, an independent from Vermont. Also on hand was Senator Paul Wellstone, Democrat of Minnesota, who pointed to the election problems to justify his decision to break his pledge to serve only two terms. "There is a lot of indignation about what happened in Florida," he told the group. "You can't walk away from this."

And there was nothing but praise for the Rev. Jesse Jackson, one of the most visible spokesmen for election reform, who acknowledged earlier this week that he had fathered a child out of wedlock and was curtailing his public activities. "I have been proud to stand with him," Representative Jan Schakowsky, Democrat of Illinois, said. "I long for his voice to be heard again."

Recognizing that no big-name Republicans had joined their cause, some here suggested trying to recruit prominent Republicans who are former felons, like Charles W. Colson of Watergate fame, to advocate that ex-felons should be allowed to vote. A more ruthless approach was also offered: prosecute Republican administrators of elections using the federal racketeering laws that have been used successfully against anti-abortionists, making the officials financially responsible for damages caused by unfair elections.

"Out of adversity we must seize this moment," said Ron Daniels, executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights, based in New York. Even if his listeners did not agree that Mr. Bush was an illegitimate president, he said, they should nonetheless believe that "all this madness is not indeed what we would like to see and profess to believe in in terms of democracy."